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ABSTRACT

Plain Talk is a neighborhood-based initiative aimed at helping adults, parents, and community leaders develop the skills and tools they need to communicate effectively with young people about reducing adolescent sexual risk-taking. Plain Talk was implemented in five urban neighborhoods in: Atlanta (Georgia); San Diego (California): Seattle (Washington); New Orleans (Louisiana); and Hartford (Connecticut). These communities were given resources and tools to develop and implement a plan. All the plans were different, but all held community residents to be central to the decision-making process, and all required residents to reach a consensus about needed actions. All of the plans acknowledged that some youth are sexually active, and all explored the root causes of adolescent sexuality. The programs applied the same five basic components: (1) community mapping; (2) resident networks; (3) education and skills building; (4) reinforcing key messages; and (5) sustaining resident involvement and leadership. The people involved in Plain Talk learned a great deal about implementing successful community-based programs. Some of the important lessons learned in the Plain Talk processes are described. (SLD)

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PlainTalk

The Story of a Community-Based Strategy to Reduce Teen Pregnancy

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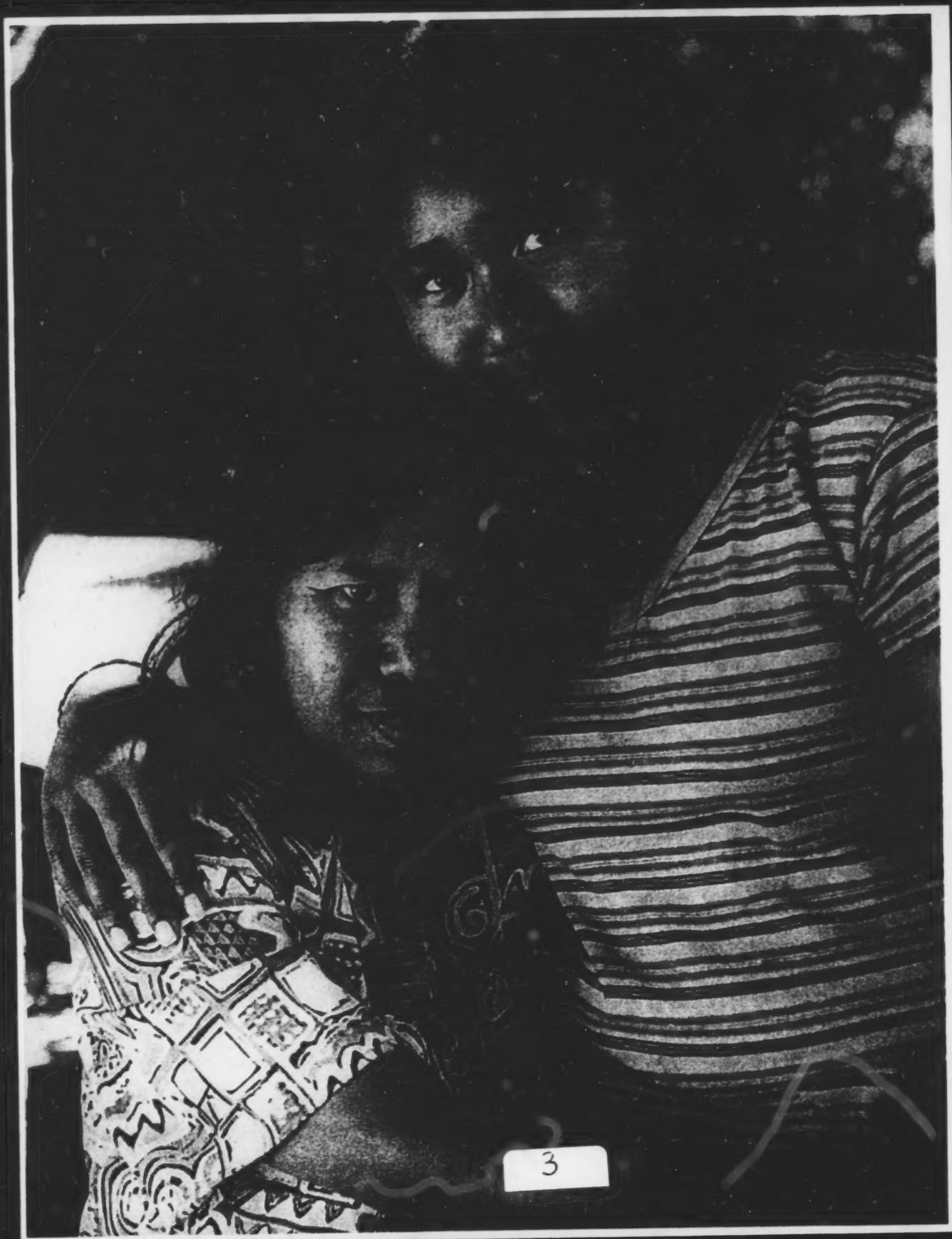

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PlainTalk

THE STORY OF A COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGY TO REDUCE TEEN PREGNANCY

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

This publication was developed by Population Services International (PSI) for The Annie E. Casey Foundation. To gather information about Plain Talk, PSI staff visited each of the program sites and met with numerous residents, collaborators, volunteers and staff. We wish to thank these individuals for their time and willingness to share their Plain Talk experiences. Repeatedly, we heard from residents in Plain Talk neighborhoods that Plain Talk was their program. We hope they feel that this publication is theirs also.

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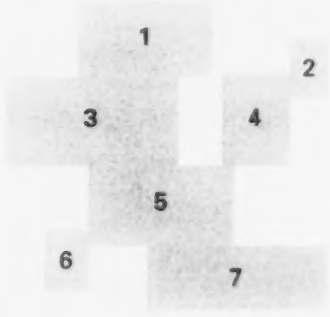

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PlainTalk

The Story of a Community-Based Strategy
to Reduce Teen Pregnancy

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT ©1998

Promotora Maria Marquez leads a *Vecino a Vecino* workshop. After Maria became involved with the project, her entire family joined her.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

THE Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private, charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuing this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities and neighborhoods create more innovative and cost-effective responses to these needs.

The Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his brothers and sisters, who named the philanthropy in honor of their mother. With assets of more than $1 billion, the Foundation is the nation's largest philanthropy dedicated exclusively to disadvantaged children.

The challenge of helping rebuild distressed communities is at the center of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's grant-making plans for the next decade. Working with neighborhoods and state and local governments, the Foundation provides support for long-term efforts to strengthen the support services, social networks, physical infrastructure, employment, self-determination and economic vitality of these communities.

One of the Foundation's initiatives is the "Plain Talk" program. Plain Talk was the outcome of dialogues between Annie E. Casey Foundation staff and communities around the U.S. about the issue of teen pregnancy. Community members suggested that adults who care for and about youth – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, clinic service providers and religious leaders – could help protect young people from the negative consequences of early sexual activity. The Foundation was convinced that community residents in the Plain Talk communities were dedicated to protecting and improving the lives of their youth, and could support the changes necessary to make this happen.

This publication tells the story of Plain Talk. A companion publication, the Plain Talk Starter Kit, picks up where this one leaves off – illustrating how Plain Talk did what it did and sharing step-by-step instructions on how other communities can implement Plain Talk in their own neighborhoods.

Plain Talk joins forces with established community groups, like this one in New Orleans.

PLAIN Talk is a neighborhood-based initiative aimed at helping adults, parents and community leaders develop the skills and tools they need to communicate effectively with young people about reducing adolescent sexual risk-taking. A four year, $5 million project launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1993, Plain Talk was implemented in five urban neighborhoods: Mechanicsville in Atlanta, Georgia; Logan Heights in San Diego, California; White Center in Seattle, Washington; St. Thomas in New Orleans, Louisiana; and Stowe Village in Hartford, Connecticut. These communities were given resources, tools, one year to develop a plan and three years to implement it. While each plan looked different, they were all connected to four basic principles:

- Community residents should be central to the decision-making process because they have the biggest stake in changing community behavior and norms.
- Residents should come to a consensus about what changes are necessary.
- Communities should have access to, or the means to obtain, reliable information about the problems and practices they are trying to address.
- Adults should not deny the reality that some youth are sexually active.

Plain Talk teams worked to create consensus among a broad base of community adults regarding the urgency of changing teen sexual behavior and the steps to address it. Exploring the root causes of adolescent sexual risk-taking, the residents of each Plain Talk community developed strategies suitable to their own culture and circumstances by applying the same five basic components:

1. Community Mapping

Community mapping gave community residents the tools to gather critical data about their own community's beliefs, norms and practices. This highly collaborative process also became a first step in forging community awareness and motivation around the issue of adolescent sexual risk-taking. Research consultants provided training and logistical support to community residents to enable them to collect essential information about their communities. Each community was then given draft survey instruments to use as starting points.

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPAPORT©1997

The first step was learning more about the realities of people living in the Plain Talk communities.

Once residents finalized the survey instrument, trained residents conducted door-to-door surveys of between 300 and 700 adult neighbors (depending on the total neighborhood population). They also interviewed an equal number of neighborhood adolescents at "youth friendly" locations, such as the local recreation center. Data gathered from interviews was then processed and analyzed by a core group of residents, lead agency staff and local collaborating agencies. Participating residents further clarified findings by conducting follow-up interviews and focus groups.

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT©1998

Plain Talk works in and with the five communities, basing their programs on what the people from each neighborhood want and need.

2. Resident Network

Early on, Plain Talk sites developed a network of supportive resident opinion leaders and spokespeople. These local leaders were able to successfully present community mapping findings and argue for necessary community action regarding teen sexual health. In each neighborhood, the network continued to be a primary means for disseminating information, recruiting resident participation and receiving feedback about Plain Talk neighborhood activities.

3. Education and Skills Building

The cornerstone of Plain Talk's educational strategy was adult peer education. In each site, Plain Talk staff worked with interested residents to develop their skills as peer educators. In turn, residents created formal and informal educational opportunities for their neighbors, such as home health parties, support groups and rites of passage ceremonies. They used innovative techniques such as role plays and culturally appropriate fables to give messages relevance and to empower participants. Residents were the primary means of delivering effective and consistent messages to their neighbors – both adults and youth.

4. Reinforcing Key Messages

To widely disseminate key messages, residents utilized a broad range of outreach activities to keep their entire neighborhood involved and informed. Plain Talk teams scheduled community-wide celebrations around local cultural events such as Cinco De Mayo or Kwaanza, as well as holidays such as Valentine's Day, Father's Day and Halloween. Plain Talk staff and resident volunteers acted as spokespeople, recruited neighbors for peer education sessions and distributed materials at these events. Through such events, residents involved in Plain Talk gained visibility as knowledgeable "Plain Talkers," approachable by adult and teen neighbors alike.

5. Sustaining Resident Involvement and Leadership

Developing leadership skills among residents was a fundamental strategy to sustain Plain Talk in each community. Through a variety of informal and formal leadership opportunities, residents assumed increased levels of responsibility for planning and carrying out activities. Residents took the lead in organizing peer education and community-wide events, and represented Plain Talk to service providers and policy makers in the larger urban community. Such resident leadership ensured that communication regarding adolescent sexual health remained attuned to the concerns and efforts of residents. It also empowered residents to tackle related issues and play a more integral role in the general well-being of their communities.

Based on these principles, Plain Talk successfully…

- Increased neighborhood awareness about the risks of teen pregnancy, STDs and HIV/AIDS
- Improved adult/adolescent communication about responsible decision-making
- Increased access to adolescent reproductive health services
- Expanded neighborhood organizations' capacity to conduct outreach and provide peer adult education
- Developed resident leadership and advocacy skills

Plain Talk was an initiative to protect young people from the risks associated with pregnancy and HIV/AIDS/STDs. It was not an effort to prevent teens from having sex, nor was it one to encourage teens to have sex. Plain Talk worked from the realities of youth in specific communities and tried to address these realities in a way that would be meaningful.

In implementing Plain Talk, participants found that some strategies and approaches central to the project could be successfully replicated in more than one site. They also discovered, however, that each community's approach needed to be tailored to the unique personality and history of its residents. What worked in New Orleans might not work in Seattle. What worked in these sites will not necessarily work in other communities, unless time, effort and resources are put in place to support resident engagement, community mobilization and leadership development strategies.

The three-year implementation period ended December 31, 1997, but Plain Talk lives on. The Annie E. Casey Foundation continues to provide technical assistance resources and small grants to support special projects, such as local policy conferences and training conferences for new partners. The investments – both the residents' and the Foundation's – continue because those who played a role in Plain Talk believe that adults can impact the behavior of youth. They found that there is value and power in resident participation and in gathering data to learn about the realities of a local situation. This publication attempts to capture some of the stories behind the achievements and vitality of each Plain Talk site.

This is the story of Plain Talk.

PHOTOS/ELIZABETH RAPAPORT©1997

Plain Talk New Orleans challenges racism, assumptions and myths, encouraging people to see things differently.

"The basic premise is the same for all [the Plain Talk sites]. It's really important that parents and kids share the information, get educated, become empowered [and] get organized in their communities... and if they do, they can make a difference."

Melba Hill Paschal, Plain Talk Atlanta Advisory Council

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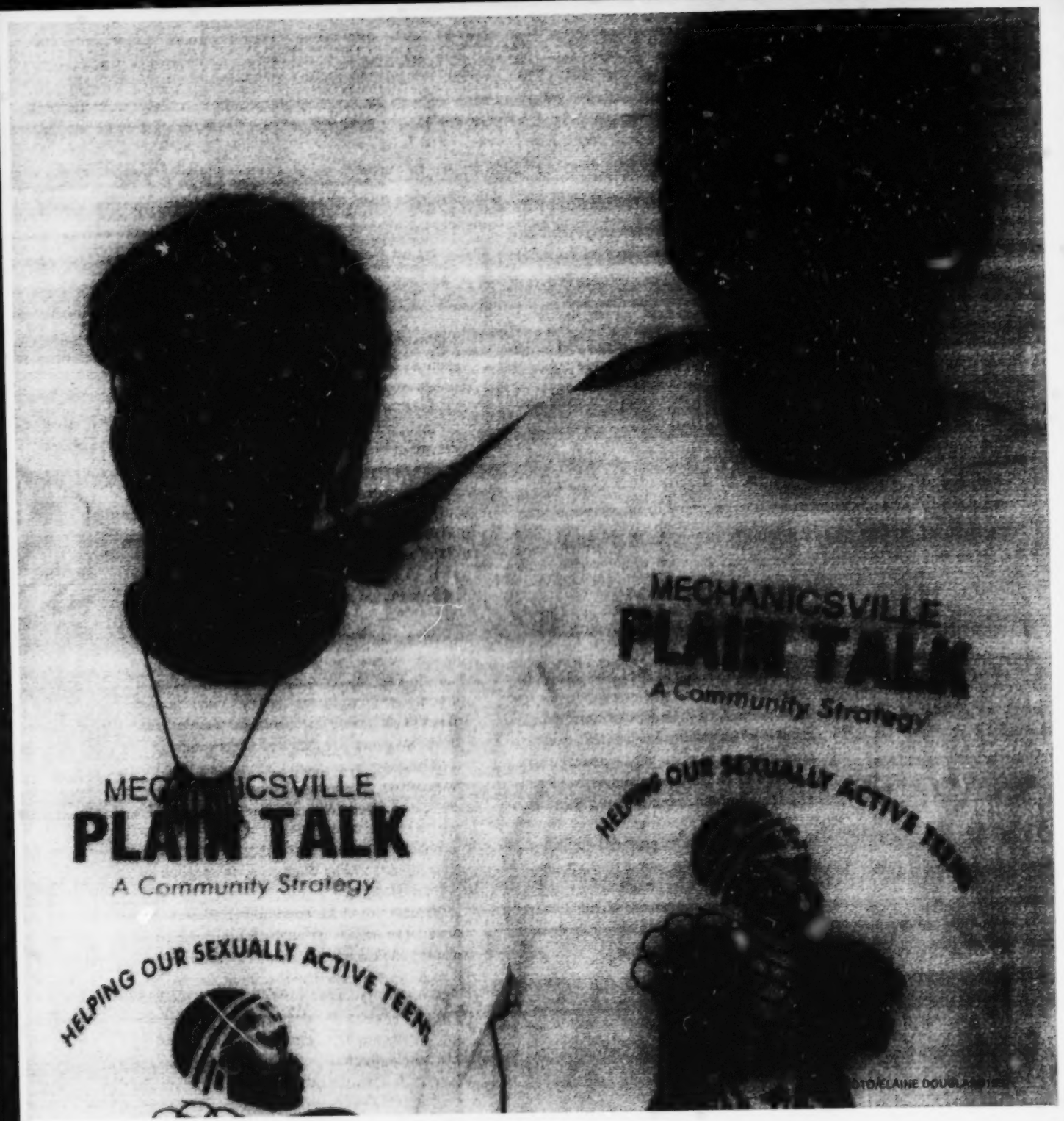

g Communities

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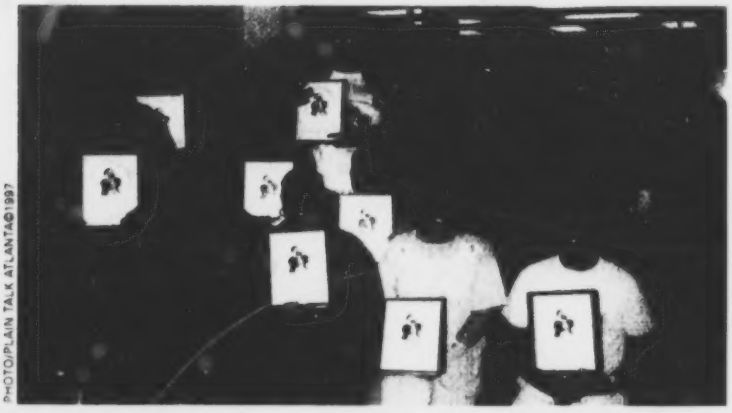
In the beginning, I could not believe that a foundation was pumping this kind of money into an initiative as provocative and innovative as Plain Talk to target sexually active youth ... as well as adults, school systems, the people who serve youth, everyone. I couldn't believe they were saying that the point of focus was not the act. The point of focus was your responsibility to the consequences... [This] empowerment process [allowed] people to hear themselves talk and listen to other people. The result was that people wanted more for themselves – jobs, education, skills. They [started to] take more responsibility for what they wanted in their lives... In all my community experiences, I have never, ever, experienced this type of community response to an issue.

CHERYL BOYKINS
Coordinator of Plain Talk Atlanta and Director of the Center for Black Women's Wellness

MECHANICSVILLE is a tract of land just a few miles from the heart of downtown and a few yards from the Atlanta Braves stadium. Made up of the McDaniel Glenn and Mt. Calvary Housing Projects (federally subsidized housing) as well as single-family homes, Mechanicsville is a combination of three-story brick apartment buildings, wooden one- and two-story town homes and bungalow-style houses. Almost all of the residents are African American. Homeowners and renters live side by side and share a clear neighborhood identity. And, partially due to Plain Talk, they now share a renewed sense of community.

Congratulations to a new group of Party Hosts.



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Becoming a Community

"Plain Talk has really helped the Mechanicsville community come together as a whole," explained one resident. "That's its greatest accomplishment." Juliet Cooper, Program Director of Teen Clinical Services for the Fulton County Health Department and a longtime Plain Talk collaborator, felt the project was particularly successful in drawing attention to a specific issue. "Plain Talk was able... to rally a community around an issue facing teens," she explained. "No other program has been able to do this."

Community Empowerment

Empowerment starts with the individual. "Plain Talk has brought a sense of learning about myself and learning that I can do things I didn't think I could do," explained Watrina Watson, a longtime resident who has volunteered since the beginning of the project and now serves as the project's community organizer. "It's helped me to speak out. I was always a person who would sit back and listen to people talk; I would never say anything, even if I didn't like it. Now, I am vocal about things I don't like."

It then moves to the community. "You make a lot of friends [through Plain Talk]," explained one community member. "Before, you might pass others who live in the neighborhood every day and say 'Hey' and just keep walking. But since we got involved with this group, we are more friendly – we stand and have conversations."

And it leads to change. "The community is so different than it used to be," another resident said. "The crime rate is down, we can sit on our porches now without having to grab our kids and run in the house, ducking from bullets. People get along better now." One resident noted another change she relates to Plain Talk. "We haven't seen that many pregnancies this summer. That's a blessing."

The Project Arrives

When Plain Talk arrived in 1993, the teen pregnancy rate in Mechanicsville was among the highest in the county (Fulton). Around 200 of every 1,000 teenage girls had become pregnant, compared to 89 of every 1,000 girls throughout the county. Plain Talk was launched out of the Center for Black Women's Wellness. "Working with the Center for Black Women's Wellness was a crucial part," explains Juliet Cooper, who has served as a Plain Talk advisor throughout the life of the project. "[The Center] had an established relationship with the community… they had trust and credibility."

PHOTO/ELAINE DOUGLAS©1997

Plain Talk encourages adults to communicate with youth and gives them tools to do it effectively.

Planning the Intervention

With the help of resident volunteers, nearly 800 adults and youth in Mechanicsville were surveyed during the initial community mapping exercise. Results indicated that while one-half of the teens in the community said that a sexual relationship could interfere with their goals and plans, nearly 90% reported having had sex by age 17. Forty-two percent of teen males and 17% of teen females reported having had sex by age 12.

Of the adults surveyed, 60% believed that most teens age 18 or older in the community have already had sex. Most adults said they had talked to teens about sex or pregnancy, but fewer youth said that this was true. Many youth told Plain Talk volunteers that they were not talking to their parents about sex, and many adults said they did not have all the information necessary to talk with their children about sex and sexuality.

The community mapping process motivated a group of residents to form the Mechanicsville Partners for Plain Talk. This group of men and women, elders, adults and youth took on the task of trying to create a program that would address the issues identified in the survey. Community members worked with the Community Coalition for Plain Talk (a group of service providers who worked with the community) to design the program. Over time, and after many meetings, residents began to feel comfortable with the providers – comfortable enough to talk about the real issues that faced the community.

Through a lengthy series of meetings and retreats, Partners for Plain Talk decided that education and information sharing would be the primary community intervention. They believed that adults didn't talk to youth because they didn't know what to say.

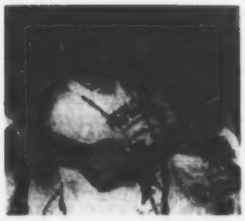
Plain Talk Partners created a variety of activities to help adults, not just parents, get the information, skills and resources they need to communicate with youth. From the first activity, an 18-part education series, Plain Talk Partners selected topics to include in future community workshops, and from here, produced the model curriculum, "Askable Adults."

Plain Talk Parties became another intervention for the Mechanicsville site. The concept came from Plain Talk New Orleans Home Health Parties. Mechanicsville added the Tupperware concept – staff trained a small group of people who, in turn, helped to train a larger group. The idea was that once neighbors and friends got involved, the effort would keep growing.

Parties were hosted by residents who had gone through the Askable Adult series and a "Party Host" training. Gatherings were seen as creative and fun ways to learn about Plain Talk and about ways to help teens make healthy choices. Neighborhood parties worked in Mechanicsville – the residents loved them. Like the rap developed by one of the Plain Talkers goes, "Ain't no party like a Plain Talk Party, 'cause a Plain Talk Party don't stop."

PHOTOS/PLAIN TALK ATLANTA©1997

Teens who participate in the Summer Youth Institute, shown here on the last day of the program, learn job skills, respect and more.



Youth in the summer leadership program wrote a play they performed at the end of the program.

Askable Adults

The Askable Adults workshop was developed with assistance from Fulton County Health Department staff. "We had thought about doing something for parents," explained Juliet Cooper of the Health Department, "because the kids in the focus groups said they did not have good communication with their parents – especially around sex." But it isn't just for parents. Since children do not always go to their parents, the workshop was designed for all adults in the community.

PHOTOS/PLAIN TALK ATLANTA©1997

Askable Adults is a communication skills workshop designed to help adults talk to youth about puberty, dating, sex, pregnancy, health and decision-making. The eight-session workshop focuses on communication. One resident who went through the series said, "In order to deal with [youth], you have to know how to talk to them... we have role plays, skits [and] get different opinions about how to handle different situations."

Teen Leadership

"It's Hot 97.5, kickin' it in the 90s... Shorty!!!" The 10-year-old boy shouts out his line, and the room full of teens responds with smiles, claps and hoots. They're practicing a play that they wrote. This activity is part of Plain Talk's Summer Youth Institute, which provides teens with information, education, enriching experiences and job skills. Respect is one of the key concepts of the program, so the 39 youth participants call each other by their last names, like "Mr. Baker" or "Ms. Jones." They work on projects like the play, but also discuss things like sexuality, AIDS and how to keep a job. They are paid to participate and are treated like workers; they're expected to arrive on time, to be dressed appropriately and to treat their peers as co-workers.

Shameka Butler described it this way. "It's called a leadership development course, but while they're teaching you how to be a leader, they're teaching you how to be part of a group... and about things that would help you in life, like computers, building friendships and just knowing how to have respect."

A Teen Center

As the program developed in Atlanta, it became clear that teens were not getting the health services they needed most. They wanted a place that was close by, one that they could afford, and one that offered more than just pregnancy and STD tests, and contraceptives. They wanted staff with whom they felt comfortable. The opening of the Dunbar Teen Center in the Dunbar Neighborhood Center was a dream come true. Run by a nurse from the Fulton County Health Department, the clinic serves males and females age 10–19 and works in partnership with Plain Talk and Center staff.

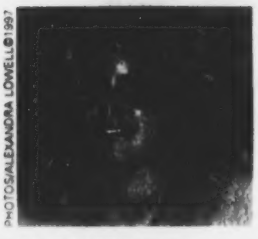
Youth come to the clinic for physical exams, contraceptives, immunizations, treatment of minor illnesses, STD/HIV testing and counseling, prenatal assessment and referrals for other services. "The Teen Center was implemented in response to what teens and parents said they needed," explained Juliet Cooper of the Fulton County Health Department. "We have another clinic five miles from the community, but the Dunbar location is... where teens hang out. It's in the hub of the community, an ideal place."

"A community strategy to help our sexually active teens protect and respect themselves."

Plain Talk Atlanta motto

Her car is famous, a '73 Chevy that people in the neighborhood call "la limosina" (the limousine). It's big and brown, and the interior is almost worn away. For more than four years, "la limosina" has carried Maria Miramontes to every nook and cranny of Barrio Logan to deliver Hablando Claro messages. Driving through the neighborhood with Maria is like being in a parade. It seems that everyone she passes knows her. "La limosina" is greeted with shouts of "Buenos días!" and "¿Como está?" or with a friendly wave or a honk of a horn. When she has time, Maria pulls over for a quick chat. This is grassroots organizing, Maria Miramontes' style.

HABLANDO Claro is Plain Talk in San Diego. The full name is Hablando Claro: Con Cariño y Respeto. Plain Talk: With Love and Respect. Hablando Claro is based in Barrio Logan (otherwise known as Logan Heights), a primarily Latino community made up of people of Mexican heritage. Community mapping showed that most of the population prefers to speak Spanish. Hence, the project's primary language is Spanish.



PHOTOS/ALEXANDRA LOWELL©1997

Xochiti Miramontes, bottom, is one reason that her mother, Maria, top, decided to get involved with Hablando Claro.

While the goal of Hablando Claro is to protect sexually active youth, the people involved with the project went beyond this goal to develop a vision: to engage adults and adolescents in open communication about sexuality. They believed that once this communication was in place, change could happen. They also wanted to encourage and facilitate collaboration between residents, medical and social service providers, and school representatives. An underlying belief of this vision is that lasting change must be embraced at the neighborhood level and proceed upward to include broader parts of society.

The people who have been and still are the guiding force of this vision are the members of the Barrio Logan Community Core Group. This group was developed soon after completion of the community mapping process and is made up mostly of community members (both adults and teens), with some agency representatives. The group received community leadership and empowerment training to be an effective voice in Barrio Logan. Currently, more than 60 residents participate in the core group.

The Neighborhood of Barrio Logan

If you talk with someone who has lived in Barrio Logan for a long time, they are likely to say that their neighborhood used to be safe, stable and united. Now, they might say that it is divided and has a high crime rate. While the challenges for the community have become more difficult over the last 30 years, Barrio Logan residents take pride in their history of coming together to support a common cause. Chicano Park, a symbol of community activism over the years, has come to most clearly represent the residents of Barrio Logan. Mexican and Chicano history, culture and spirituality are expressed in the form of beautifully painted murals on cement towers in the park that support the highway linking San Diego to Mexico. With such a strong history of activism, it might seem that community leadership already exists. However, the energy and power of the '60s did not make its way fully into the '90s. Through training and leadership development, Hablando Claro strives to renew community leadership and to challenge something they call an alienation consciousness – a feeling of alienation that often happens as Latino immigrants adjust to the mainstream culture.

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Maria Miramontes gets some help loading "la limosina" with Hablando Claro materials.

The Promotoras

While the energy of Hablando Claro comes from the Community Core Group, the action is visible in the work of the promotoras, community members who serve as messengers for the project – delivering information and skills that will help protect sexually active youth. This sharing of information happens during conversations on the street as well as during a workshop series known as Vecino a Vecino (neighbor to neighbor). Promotoras seek opportunities with community residents to host Vecino a Vecino and invite family, friends and neighbors to participate in the four-session workshops. Once a week for one month, community members gather in the home of one of their neighbors to discuss Hablando Claro messages.

"The curriculum for the Vecino a Vecino workshops was born out of the community survey," explained Marta Flores, Director of Hablando Claro. Community members worked to create a curriculum that was culturally and linguistically appropriate, and at the same time encouraged adults to rethink how they viewed issues of sex and sexuality and to consider discussing these issues with youth.

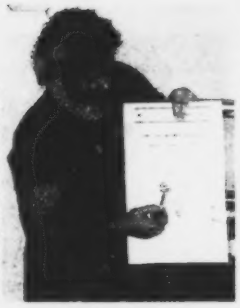
CIRCLE OF MEN

Walking through Barrio Logan with Hector Villegas is like walking with someone old and wise. But Hector is only 21, and a former gang member. "I was arrested in a case of assault and robbery and spent three months in jail… I kept thinking, 'man, when is this going to end?' When I came out, I knew I wanted to change my ways…"

After hearing about a job with *Circulo de Hombres* ("Circle of Men"), a program that evolved out of Hablando Claro which targets males in teen pregnancy prevention and reducing fatherlessness, Hector started going to meetings and was eventually hired on to work with the group. "At first I thought, man this stuff isn't 'cool' you know? But then I opened my eyes more… listened to the things Macedonio [group leader] was talking about. He was trying to instill values. He was encouraging me to work hard, to try to help others, to respect women. He showed me a way of life."

"For Latino youth, Circulo is a rite of passage," says Marta Flores. "This program gives them the opportunity to learn about human sexuality and [serve as] mentors for the younger Latino males." Until Hablando Claro, men were not actively recruited to participate in education and prevention programs highlighting human sexuality. Using the three P's (patience, presence and persistence), men became instrumental in program planning and creating opportunities for other men to come together with their families.

Hablando Claro found it hard to get men involved in their education efforts until they formed *Circulo de Hombres*.



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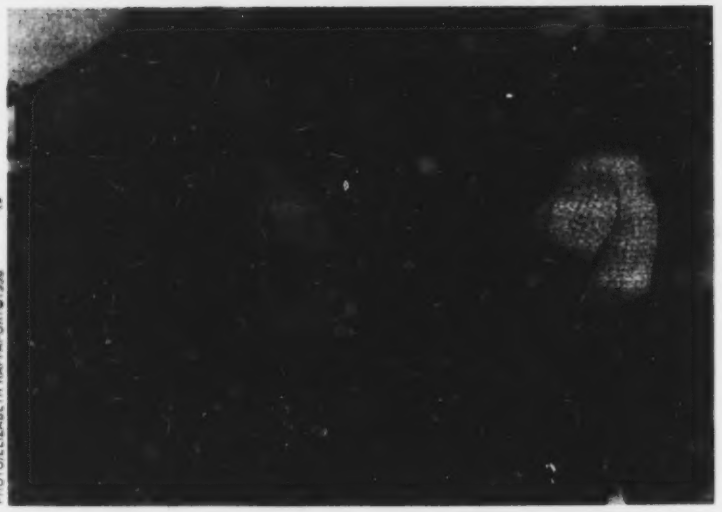
Education is key to improved communication. Here, Maria Marquez leads an education session for adults.

Impact

Community members believe that Hablando Claro is creating change. "I was motivated to work with Hablando Claro because my daughter got pregnant when she was 14 years old," Maria Marquez said. "I realized I couldn't change what happened to my daughter, but I can help prevent it from happening to other teenagers or [to] my other five children."



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While the goal of Hablando Claro is to protect sexually active youth, the vision is to engage adults and teens in open communication about sexuality.

Hablando Claro strives to work within the cultural richness of its people. "We have many strong customs and traditions that help to keep us a strong people," explained Marta Flores. "But at the same time, we have a cultural silence that hurts us. And now in the light of HIV/AIDS, it's more than just an issue of having a baby."

"The community survey made us open our eyes to something that for a long time we haven't wanted to acknowledge openly," said Marta. "The survey focused on us, not Latino communities in Santa Fe, New Mexico or general statistics from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)." The survey forced residents to face the painful truth: 50% of teens in Barrio Logan will have had a sexual experience by age 16, and three out of four sexually active teen girls will get pregnant by age 18. Whereas a majority of youth surveyed said they would prefer receiving information about sexuality from their parents, parents reported they were too embarrassed and didn't know how and what to say to their teens.

Many adults had a difficult time accepting the results of the survey, and getting people involved took time. Marta confirms, "At the beginning, the Community Core Group was made up of 10 agencies and maybe five residents. Today, the majority of participants (64) are residents and there are maybe three or four agencies."

The murals of Chicano Park reflect the history of the neighborhood and its people. This mural is a tribute to community activist, Laura Rodriguez, who was the driving force behind the establishment of a neighborhood community health center.

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SEATTLE

Residents

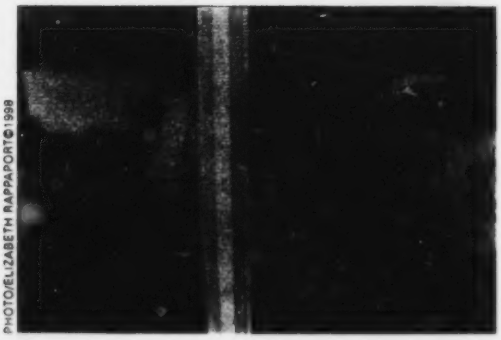
as Stakeholders

White Center has historically drawn immigrants to its quiet streets. It is thought that the "village" feel of the place helps them to feel more at home. White Center is a small, but diverse community. Approximately 40% of the 19,000 residents are Asian/Pacific Islanders – people from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and the Philippines. Recently, more and more Eastern Europeans have moved to the area as well as Latin Americans and African Americans.

Residents as Advisors

When Plain Talk came to this community, one of the first orders of business was to set up a resident advisory committee. Meeting every other Thursday night for three years, this group worked hard to gather information about the community and to decide what the Plain Talk initiative would look like in White Center.

"I was asked to represent my PTA (Parent Teacher Association) at the Plain Talk Advisory Committee," explained Corina Hill, one of the committee members. "Right away, they made me feel welcomed. I was encouraged to become involved."



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White Center is a diverse community – Plain Talk got neighbors talking with each other, then working together on a common problem.

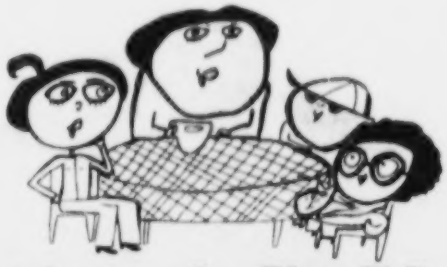
"I became comfortable with people of different cultures," explained another committee member. "We had cultural diversity workshops... these were helpful. At the end, [I saw that] we were all people and I didn't have to be afraid... of my community, of [people with a different] socioeconomic status."

Beyond personal "paybacks," Plain Talk White Center offered residents an opportunity to give something to their community. Diane Hamilton, who has lived in White Center her entire life, said, "The advisory committee gave me a chance to give input into what is going on in the neighborhood."

The Neighborhood Survey

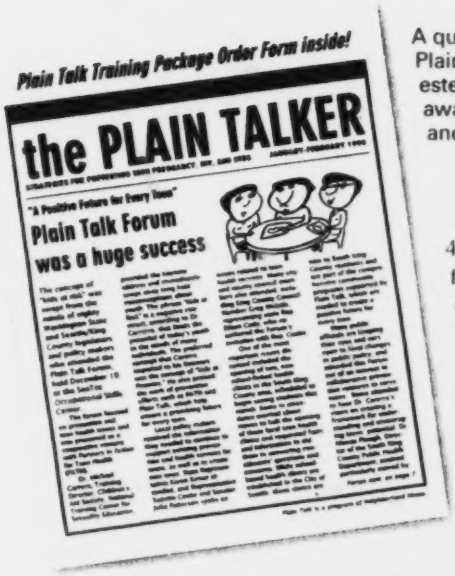
Through the mapping exercise, community members discovered that parents and teens rarely, if ever, talked about sexuality. They found that 67% of the youth reported that they were sexually active by the time they were 19. While almost three-quarters of the adults acknowledged this, less than one-half thought that their children were having sex before they were 19.

One challenge for the mapping exercise was the language barrier between English-speaking surveyors and recent immigrants from Southeast Asia. While a large percentage of the White Center population was Southeast Asian, less than 12% of the surveyors were from this population. Southeast Asian teens, however, were fairly well represented in the teen results.



It's time for Plain Talk

21


Plain Talk Training Package Order Form inside!

the PLAIN TALKER

"A Positive Future for Every Teen"

Plain Talk Forum was a huge success

A quarterly newsletter helps Plain Talk Seattle keep interested agencies and individuals aware of program activities and related issues.

42% of those surveyed were from Cambodia, Vietnam and other Asian cultures.

Creating the Tools

Plain Talk for Parents is the basic tool used by Plain Talk White Center to address the issue of teenage pregnancy. The curriculum, presented in a series of four classes, is designed to help parents talk with their children about dating, sex, health, STDs, drug abuse and decision-making. The classes focus on communication skills-building activities and provide time for questions and conversation. Tools like animated video programs and cartoon print activity worksheets are used to present a wide variety of scenarios depicting modern day adult/youth interaction.

Patty Plain Talk, who quickly became the project's mascot, is the central character in the cartoon. Parents have homework after each class, which is to work with their children on a series of Patty Plain Talk cartoon scenarios. Through this process, they begin to feel more comfortable in their role as a communicator within their families.

Designing a parent-youth communication curriculum for community members of White Center was a long yet fulfilling process. "The inspiration for Plain Talk for Parents and for the Patty Plain Talk [cartoon] character was Diana Rivera [Co-Chair of the Advisory Committee]," explained Dominic Cappello, creator of Plain Talk for Parents and training director during this phase of the project. "Her stories helped me see the problems she faced. She was a teen mom, and she didn't want Carmen, her 17-year-old daughter, to be the same. She wanted to break the cycle."

Outreach to the Asian Community

To reach Asian residents of White Center, the Advisory Committee hired an Outreach Worker, Nary Suon, an immigrant from Cambodia, to work with Southeast Asian members of the community. Nary encouraged more Asian residents to become involved in the project and developed culturally appropriate programs to attract these community members. Yany Sok, one of Nary's recruits who became an active Plain Talker, believes that the project was successful in reaching Asian community members because it employed Asian people.

Nary also developed her own Plain Talk for Parents workshops tailored to Asian residents. She expanded the existing curriculum to include more parenting skills to bridge the gap between parents who grew up in Asia, and their

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT©1998

Nary Suon hands out certificates for parents who successfully completed the workshop she developed for Southeast Asian residents of White Center.

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Community events keep residents active and involved.

children who have taken on American customs – many of which put them at risk. "Parents know how to produce kids," explained Nary, "but they need education to protect them. If you want to help kids, you must put more services in [the] community, more parenting classes [and] more ways to help families."

An Effective and Innovative Approach

The training in White Center has been well received and has even attracted attention from other parts of the city and country. As such, Plain Talk has been invited to share its training and approach with other communities. Classes are free for White Center residents, who are offered incentives, like gift certificates, for completing the class. Since it was not always this easy to get people to come to the classes, Plain Talk used community-organizing techniques to increase awareness and garner interest. They focused their efforts on an uncommon target, the PTA. According to Lisa Perry, project director when this activity was taking place, "PTAs are the last bastion of unorganized groups of people in this country. They are in the community, they [attract] lots of people and they are looking for good programs."

Plain Talk formed links with PTAs and used these links to organize a community-wide effort. It sounds simple, but it wasn't. Like many community efforts, it was a slow process that required time and patience. According to Plain Talk staff, they "saturated" the education system in Highline (White Center's school district), meeting individually with every principal, every PTA head and with hundreds of teachers, health educators and school nurses. It worked. During 1995 and 1996, more than 300 people attended 18 Plain Talk for Parents courses and 133 graduated.

PHOTO: ELIZABETH RAPAPORT © 1998

In White Center, Plain Talk focuses on encouraging residents to get involved in their community.

Community Organizing

The approach used in all of Plain Talk White Center's programs did more than pass along communication skills to parents and other adults. It encouraged residents and other stakeholders to become community organizers and helped them to become effective advocates for change in their community. It was, as a staff person explained, "one-half communication training and one-half community organizing."

During the workshops, participants discussed the importance of parents being out in the community – advocating for better education and better health services for youth. Plain Talk showed community members that they could be effective advocates for their children. It encouraged them to talk about the current status of health services, and it offered tools they could use to ensure that the necessary changes happened. They learned how to speak out at community meetings, write letters to county council members and find the places to take their concerns.

Challenges

With every success, there is a challenge. Several years into the project, it became more difficult to keep the community involved. A former staff member felt that some of this was due to the realities of community members' lives. "Residents are dealing with so much low income, low education, horrible child care… their basic needs are not being met. It may be presumptuous to assume that people could drop all other challenges and focus on teen pregnancy." There was also frustration when foundation support ended just as the project was ready to expand its efforts.

One resident felt that the project started getting away from the community. "As soon as you get away from involving the community, you lose the community." She wondered if Plain Talk relied too much on experts in the field, rather than members of the community. "At the beginning [of Plain Talk White Center], the community was involved… but hiring professional people can lose people. We were good when the community was involved. We were most effective when staff were from the community."

A Difference

Despite these challenges, Plain Talk White Center has positively impacted this small community and continues to work with parents and PTAs throughout the Highline school district. "Plain Talk has made a difference to the youth in the neighborhood," said one longtime resident of White Center. "I see the difference."

WALKING HER CHILD TO SAFETY

Carrying her infant son in her arms, Yany Sok traveled on foot from her homeland of Cambodia to Thailand. It was 1979, a year when it was dangerous to live in Cambodia if you were educated or from the wrong class. Now, her son is 17. He has lived most of his life in the United States and he acts like any American teenager – he hates homework, plays basketball, asks to borrow the family car. His mother tells him her story from time to time… reminding him of the dangerous roads she traveled to get him to safety.

Yany believes that this story may help her son navigate the dangerous roads of youth. Maybe he will remember who he is and how much his mother loves him. Maybe he won't put himself at risk. She believes that the biggest risk for her son is irresponsible sexual behavior, and for good reason. Seattle has a higher rate of new HIV infections among youth than most U.S. cities.

So, when a fellow Cambodian approached Yany several years ago and asked her to participate in a program called "Plain Talk," Yany was interested. She learned how to talk to her children and other community youth. She learned about STDs and HIV and prevention… she learned about condoms. "I was taught to be shy about my body," she explained, "it is my custom… but now I can explain things to my kids. I can talk, you know."

"Plain Talk is a group of interested citizens of the White Center area who are concerned about teenage pregnancy, STDs and HIV. They feel they can make an impact on the population by exposing these kids to a curriculum where we have actually done what we call *plain* talk – opening up conversations that lead the way, and speaking in a manner they can understand."

Dick Finney, community member involved with the project

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NEW ORLEANS
HARTFORD

Relevant

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Messages

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On a steamy July evening in St. Thomas, Robert "Kool Black" Horton was playing volleyball with Plain Talk youth when a commotion broke out. Several police chased a male suspect into an apartment building. A woman ran up to Kool and said that the police were choking her 13-year-old daughter. Kool went to the apartment where the officers were and found a hysterical young woman. He identified himself to the girl and the police as a member of the St. Thomas Peacekeepers and explained that he wanted to know if everything was okay. One thing led to another and before anyone knew what was happening, Kool Black was arrested and charged with inciting a riot.

BUT a riot never happened. Instead, concerned citizens, many of whom knew Kool Black as well as the people in the apartment where the commotion occurred, came out to show their concern and support to work together as a community to make sure that no one was hurt, or wrongfully accused. Kool Black was released several hours later. The next day residents called a community meeting and invited the police and the press. The police apologized and the community was assured that the officers involved would no longer be allowed to come into the St. Thomas neighborhood. They promised a full investigation and a thorough review of all of the community's demands.

Kool Black is an officer of Black Men United for Change Inc. (BMUFC) and a member of the St. Thomas Peacekeepers, groups that were formed out of the Plain Talk project. BMUFC is "an anti-racist organization of African American males working for spiritual peace, Black unity and self-determination through a sense of identity." The group addresses the male's role in sexuality issues and encourages men to become more informed and vocal in addressing community issues. BMUFC created the St. Thomas Peacekeepers, an unarmed community peacekeeping team that addresses community safety and security issues.

VonKeith Jackson, Plain Talk's Manhood Coordinator described the Peacekeepers as "our version of the community police. It's done strictly around relationship building with the people... [Peacekeepers] live in the community, so they can diffuse problems before they get blown out of proportion." He believes that Plain Talk really got things going in St. Thomas. "Plain Talk raised awareness of STDs and teen pregnancy, brought about collaboration... [and] a sense of empowerment within the community," he explained. "It also brought a sense of community – people working together as a whole. Before, everyone was doing their individual thing, now we are [a] collaboration of people coming together to make this community a better place to live."

The Plain Talk New Orleans motto, "It takes a whole village to raise a child," comes from an African proverb. In this community, it has become more than mere words, but a way of living. Residents treat St. Thomas as a village. It's a lively scene. People speak to each other, share their lunch with anyone who is nearby, joke about recent card games, share

The program in New Orleans promotes a cohesive community spirit and a community-wide sense of responsibility.

PHOTO/ELAINE DOUGLAS©1997

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stories about their children and grandchildren and give each other rides to the store. How things are today can be attributed, at least in part, to Plain Talk, which had the advantage of coming into a community where there was a strong residents council. The St. Thomas Residents Council had already established itself as the controlling body for the community. As such, it oversaw the planning and implementation of Plain Talk (and all other projects in the community) to ensure that its approach was bottom-up, that it actively involved youth and that the messages were culturally sensitive.

An Afrocentric Approach

Plain Talk in St. Thomas is more than discussions about safe sex. The project decided early on that adolescent sexuality in the community would not be separated from other issues of community concern. Youth pregnancy prevention was viewed as a part of total community development. Using an Afrocentric approach (where responsibility rests with the individual as a part of his/her community), the central focus of the project was to strengthen the family structure whereby measures are taken to protect and nurture its members, especially sexually active teens. Communication skills were stressed as a key factor in helping parents and other adults talk to young people about sex and sexuality. Plain Talk also focused on specific community groups, such as males, as a broader community effort.

PHOTO/ELAINE DOUGLAS©1997

Kool Black is committed to helping out in the St. Thomas housing project, where he grew up and still lives.

PHOTO/ELAINE DOUGLAS©1997

Plain Talk helps families in St. Thomas communicate more effectively.

To further develop this approach, project staff and volunteers developed the curriculum *Healing our Sexual Collective,* which covers topics such as racism and oppression affecting the St. Thomas community, an Afrocentric world view, child and adolescent development within a cultural context, and conflict resolution within an Afrocentric framework. Education is not just offered to residents. People involved with Plain Talk – donors, trainers, technical assistance staff, developers and residents – are required to take an "Undoing Racism" workshop. The approach is comprehensive, challenging all involved people to look, not just at the apparent problems, but at their roots – daring them to see not just the obvious, but the whole picture. And offering them an opportunity to find solutions that just may work.

Getting the Messages Out

The messages of Plain Talk in New Orleans are clear, concise and relevant, and all are based on the principle of self-determination. They emphasize that people have control over their lives. David Billings, coordinator of the St. Thomas/Irish Channel Consortium, described Plain Talk as "the process through which the messages can get out."

Some of the messages used are, "You have a whole life in front of you… take time, be patient," "Sex is a good and whole part of life," "Kids don't get pregnant by themselves, men have a lot to do with that" and "If you use condoms right, they will work and feel okay." These messages get out into the community through "Walkers and Talkers," a group of residents trained as peer outreach workers. Each walker and talker has two "little sisters or brothers" to mentor. And each is assigned

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT©1997

Plain Talk adults believe that all the children in St. Thomas should be loved, honored and cared for.

about 10 families to check on – asking how they can help, reinforcing the messages. They walk through projects, knock on doors and talk about Plain Talk. Conversations and information provide focus on effective communication with youth, contraceptives, STDs, HIV and health service delivery. Walkers and Talkers also host Home Health Parties where residents can talk about these issues in the comfort of people's homes. Ms. McKnight, one of the most respected members of the community, summed it up this way. "Plain Talk is community-driven, not program-driven. Plain Talk is about taking charge of [our] lives. We needed the money to get people in in the first place, but the program itself didn't do anything. It was the people."

Through this process, they identified 125 families to serve as role models and mentors, bridging the gap between adults and youth. Plain Talk developed the "100 Families" strategy – which has long since exceeded its goal – in an effort to expand the pool of community leadership and advocate community wellness. In the beginning, messages were delivered in what one collaborator called a "guerilla movement way." Plain Talkers would come to community meetings with condoms and teach people about condoms. They decorated the neighborhood Christmas tree with condoms and used bananas to demonstrate their use. They also challenged people's nervousness in talking about sex, condoms and sexually active youth. An end result of this approach was that sexual activity among teenagers was no longer denied in St. Thomas.

PHOTO/ELAINE DOUGLAS©1997

Keenan Ward has a renewed relationship with his mother and the rest of his family as a result of Plain Talk.

In his years of being involved with Plain Talk, Kool ("Knowledge of Our [Black] Lives") Black became a role model for the neighborhood children. One spring, in anticipation of a long and possibly boring summer, Kool tried to think of something he could do with the kids, especially with the young men. He considered football and baseball, but finally decided to form a drill team. Now, with just two seasons behind them, the 10- to 13-year-olds look sharp. They follow the directions Kool calls out with precision and confidence, and answer his calls of "I say 'Black', you say..." with a resounding "Power." They repeat his "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud" clearly and loudly as they march, turn and kick. When they aren't practicing, they talk about safe sex, discuss their ethnic history and culture and go on field trips. The people of St. Thomas are committed to following these youth into the future. "If they need school supplies, we'll buy them, when they need jobs, we'll help find them." In the meantime, the kids are going to keep practicing.

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT©1997

Stowe Village, or "The Vill," sits at the very north end of Hartford a few miles from downtown, yet worlds away. It is made up of a series of rectangle-shaped brick buildings set on a flat, unlandscaped plot of land. Rows of non-descript buildings are distinguished from each other only by different graffiti messages. The people of Stowe Village are Hispanic (51%) and African American (48%) and the project is bilingual. Each education session is offered in English as well as Spanish and all materials are developed in both languages.

IT'S just a conversation – between parents and teens, between community members, between teens, between residents and service providers. It's also more than just a conversation, and Hartford's Plain Talk/Hablando Claro project proves this. It's about being there to talk to teens about whatever issues come up – whether about a fight that's going to happen, or about getting job training, or about which type of contraceptive to buy. It's about making sure that community clinics know what services to offer and how to offer them. It's about working with adults and helping them talk to youth.

Plain Talk/Hablando Claro is one of the only community projects that has come to Stowe Village and stayed. It's also one of the few projects that residents welcome. Pete Long, coordinator of another program operating in Stowe Village, put it this way, "Plain Talk is well loved. No one here says anything bad about Plain Talk. In a place like this, if they don't say something bad, that's really something."

PHOTO/PLAIN TALK HARTFORD©1997

The Plain Talk/Hablando Claro health fair gets residents of Stowe Village together to talk about issues that concern them.

After asking community members to get involved in the effort, after completing the community mapping, after forming the residents board of directors and after creating a strategy to address the high incidence of teen pregnancy in the area, Hartford residents developed the combination logo-message, "It's just a conversation." "Plain Talk came into Stowe Village with an open mind," explained one of the residents. The goals and the specific activities to reach those goals came later.

A Strategy that Fit

Residents and staff worked together to create a strategy. Their goal was to encourage parents, other adults and service providers to engage in open, effective and informative communication with youth on sexuality, responsibility, contraception and protection. It was critical that the strategy promoted a process that empowered residents.

The communication strategy includes peer education programs for youth (facilitating conversations between older and younger youth) and training for adults, which focuses on helping them deliver Plain Talk/Hablando Claro messages to their children and other adults. Another part of the strategy includes getting service providers to talk about how best to serve the people of "The Vill" as well as organizing community events like block parties to help people find the time to talk. While some Plain Talk programs focus on adults, Hartford has maintained a dual focus on adults and youth.

There are teen rap sessions for youth age 14 and up. Rosalind Teresa Crumpton, organizer of the sessions, explained how they work. "We talk about STDs, we talk about teen pregnancy, we talk about HIV/AIDS, we talk about domestic violence among teens, talk about teen relationships... a lot of topics. I pick topics based on what the teens tell me they want... like we're going to have someone bring in an

PHOTO/PLAIN TALK HARTFORD©1997

Awards ceremonies, such as this one for youth, is just one of the community events the program organizes.

'empathy belly' (to show what it feels like to be pregnant). I try to utilize a teen peer educator because teens feel more comfortable talking to other teens."

There's a male group that meets regularly to talk about issues that are important to the men of Stowe Village. They talk about how to communicate with their children, how to protect themselves and their partners from HIV, how to be role models for youth, how to manage the stress in their lives and how to be responsible to their children and their mates. Sometimes a resident facilitator leads the groups, as well as speakers from organizations such as the Urban League, or a member of the project's advisory council.

One community member who has been involved in the project since the beginning described how the strategy made a difference in her life. "[Since Plain Talk], I care more about my community. The only way to make it better is for you to go out and make it better. Fight for what you believe in. Get up and do better things."

The Project

A resident explained, "Plain Talk helped a lot of people, it got them stirred up and they went out and got jobs. Some of them have cars now, it's teaching them that they can be independent, they can go out on their own."

Plain Talk/Hablando Claro has had its challenges. It's been difficult to get people involved in the health sessions, to get them to talk about the prohibited topic of sex (especially in the

"IT'S TEARS AND IT'S JOY"

Rosalind Teresa Crumpton,
Plain Talk Community Organizer

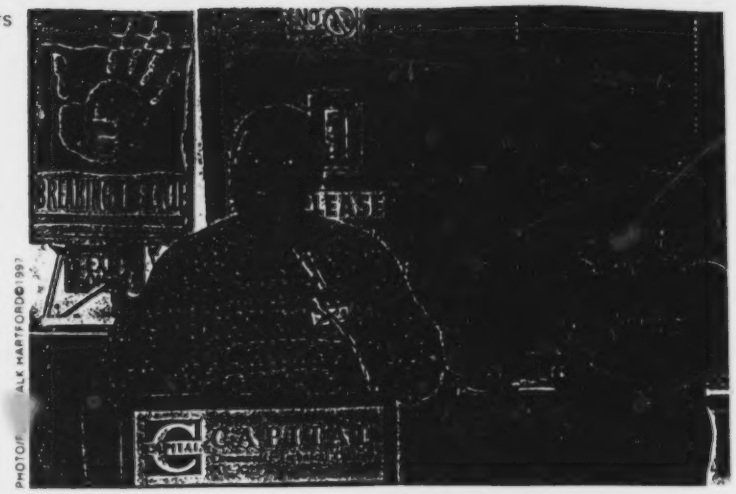
"I've lived in Stowe Village most of my life and have been involved with Plain Talk since the beginning. I walked door to door to complete community mapping activities, participated in the 12-week course and talked to a lot of people. Before Plain Talk, sexual issues were a big NO in my mind. It was very sad. Now, I can sit down and talk to my kids about these issues... even joke about a lot of things. My son, who is 16, comes to me and says, 'Mommy, I got to talk to you about something.'

"I volunteered for a full year. I just kept coming back... and it kept getting bigger and bigger. Plain Talk [even] got me a job... and a lot of other people too. [As a community organizer for Plain Talk], I organize health concern groups, teen rap sessions [and] am the staff person for our teen clinic. I schedule the appointments, go out in the community and get kids to come to the clinic, get them to open up to the health practitioner."

PHOTO/PLAIN TALK HARTFORD©1997

Skill building is an integral part of Plain Talk/Hablando Claro activities, helping residents and staff do things they never thought possible. Here, Rosalind Teresa Crumpton speaks to the media about the project.

The program sponsors a forum for the men of Hartford.



Hispanic community), to get them to take time away from their busy lives to be more involved. People need to get jobs and take care of their families. They're busy with that.

However, the conversation takes place. In the hallways, on the streets and in the courtyards, the people of Stowe Village are talking about sex, protection, family responsibility, taking care of yourself, future options and about the importance of school. As one resident described Plain Talk, "It's a family portrait, someone with an extended hand, patting someone on the shoulder, someone giving information to someone else, a hug, a tear, a secret."

Melissa Billie facilitates discussion on teen pregnancy prevention at the *Breaking the Cycle* media summit

FROM GANGS TO COLLEGE... AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

Melissa Billie's Story

When Melissa Billie was 14, she was tough. She hung out on the streets of Stowe Village, cared very little for school and even ran with a gang. She describes herself at that time as "one of the teenagers most likely not to succeed." Four years later, Melissa has graduated from high school and is planning to go to college to study fashion design. What happened in Melissa's life during those years is an important addition to the story of Plain Talk.

Melissa lived in Stowe Village for most of her life. When she was a child, she shared an apartment with her parents, her brother and her six sisters. Now, only Melissa and her 16-year-old sister live at home with their mother. "At the beginning," Melissa explained, "I hung out there [at the Plain Talk office]. And they gradually took me in... just let me come to things. They always made me feel part of the team." Before long, she really was one of the team – she became a member of the advisory group.

"Plain Talk hired people to come in and train us to do presentations," Melissa remembered. "That was one of the climaxes of my life – when I accepted Plain Talk as a source of help. I remember a man named Carlos. He came out and told us he had HIV. I remember crying for half of the presentation. I started realizing how real things are... and either I try to do something to get out of it or I get caught up in it." Gradually, Melissa became more involved with Plain Talk. She went on team-building retreats and to conferences, volunteered at the project office and began making presentations. She started leading discussions during Plain Talk's weekly rap sessions on issues like teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention, and presented at juvenile detention centers, the YMCA and the YWCA. Before long, Plain Talk staff felt that Melissa was one of the most effective youth educators in the project.

Melissa believes in her heart that if she hadn't become involved with Plain Talk and later with other community efforts, she would not be where she is today. "I don't think I would be on this road to success," she said. "Basically, I owe it all to Plain Talk," she explains, then quickly adds, "as well as to myself."

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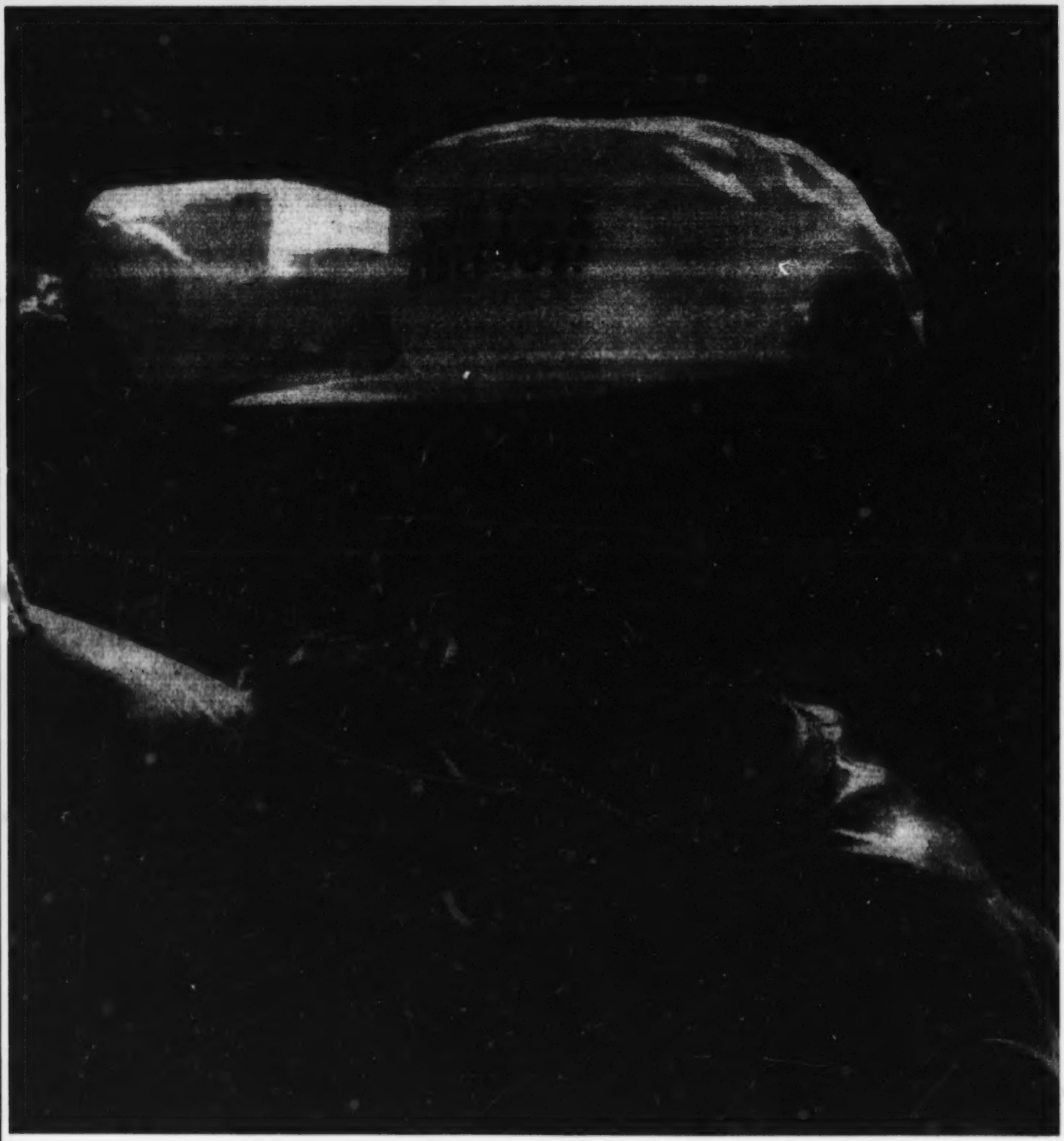
Lessons



Learned

Real Change is Possible

PHOTO/ELIZABETH RAPPAPORT©1998

Plain Talk focuses on the realities of youth in specific communities.

THE people involved in Plain Talk learned a wealth of information about implementing successful community-based programs. Their stories show that an effective program can result in real change.

The Plain Talk process requires a concentrated effort over a long period of time. It demonstrates that if community members are truly engaged and brought into the decision-making process, the communities themselves will change, and the members of those communities will sustain the actions necessary to continue the improvements. Then, even if funding for a particular program ends, its impact will not.

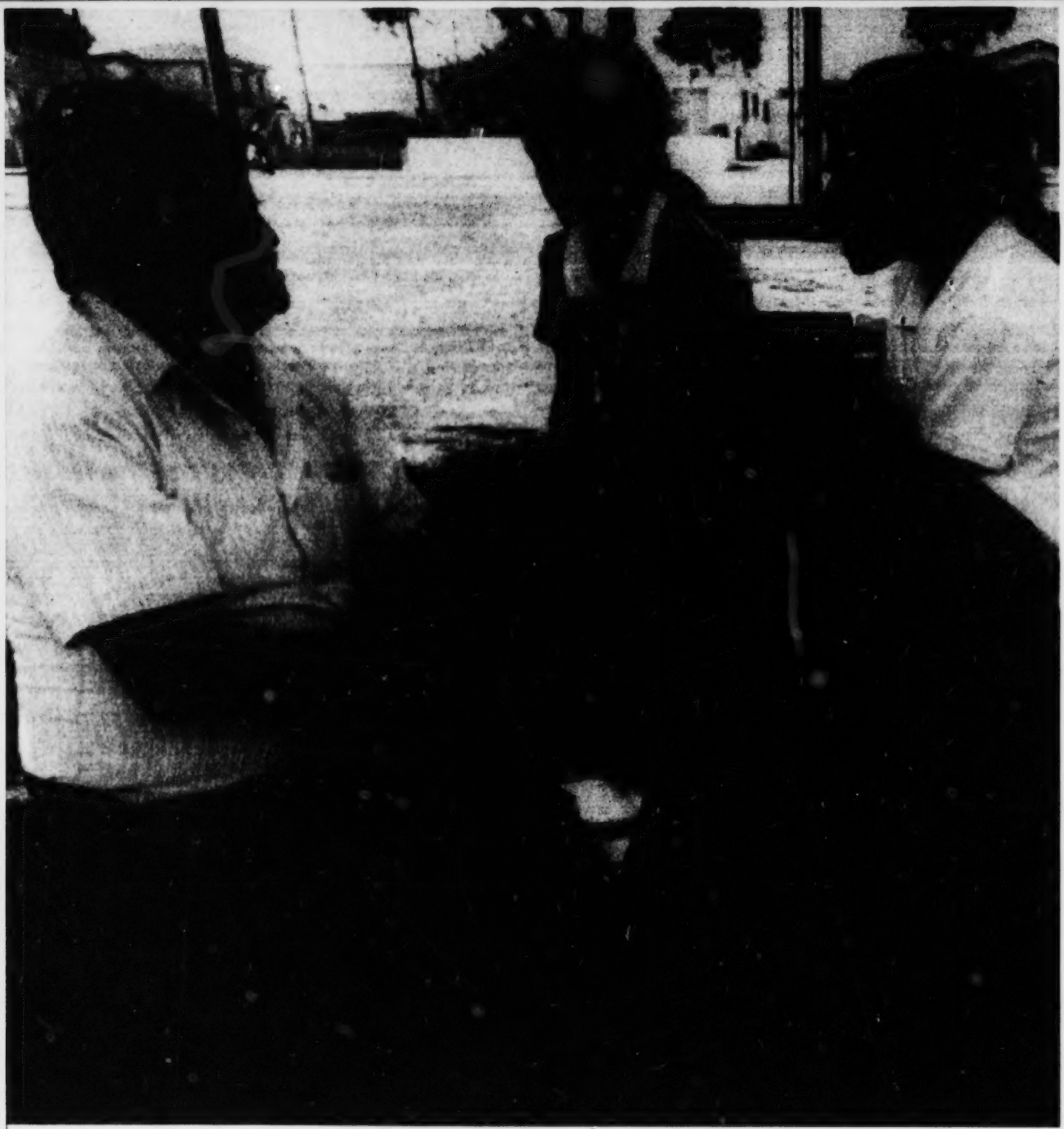
Changes in Plain Talk communities were two-way. Community residents changed as well as the institutions serving them. Both learned to communicate and compromise to best meet their needs. The people involved in Plain Talk hope that their experiences will motivate and help other communities address the social and health issues that are meaningful to them.

Some important things Plain Talk participants learned are:

- Programs seeking to address social issues and systemic change should commit to a long-term effort; changes in the first year will be minimal.
- People want to be involved in their communities; they want to feel that they belong to something.
- Engaging men on topics generally identified with women requires "patience, presence and persistence" in recruiting and retaining them in the community process.
- Community mapping is the first step in community mobilizing and a critical step in designing a relevant program to address neighborhood problems and needs.
- Employing community members is an important part of community organizing and empowerment.
- Sustaining community member employment means finding ways to help employees do their job effectively. People who have not worked "desk jobs" before need support to succeed – including skills and leadership development.
- Programs should carefully identify the skills and strengths employees need and selectively choose community members to participate.
- True community-based programs are a process; participants should be prepared for constant change and learn to be flexible.
- Programs should focus on the processes of leadership and capacity development, not a regimented workplan.
- Programs should focus on one element at a time.
- Documentation of the process should start at the beginning; participants should keep anecdotal information and pretests, and look for other ways to measure change.

Plain Talkers offer these suggestions for people who are looking at the issue of teen pregnancy, STDs and HIV/AIDS:

- Adults can do something to help young people in their communities learn how to protect themselves from the risks of unprotected sex.
- Keep the program "resident driven" since residents design and control the environment of youth.
- Parent education is a critical tool for equipping parents and families with the skills, information and comfort needed to reduce the risks of adolescent sexual behaviors.
- Focus on supporting a real community dialogue, not on finding a quick fix.
- Community residents should be engaged whenever possible.
- Develop the community's ability to institutionalize the vision; keep it "community driven."
- Don't take short cuts. Plain Talk worked because residents were involved and because the time was taken to actively involve them.



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